

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Heather Taylor Johnson, *Thirsting for Lemonade* (Interactive Press, 2013)

Exactly what readers can expect from Heather Taylor Johnson's third book of poetry is evident in its title. *Thirsting for Lemonade* aptly characterises expat Taylor Johnson's poems about being an American in Adelaide, South Australia, from her volume's nostalgic depiction of saccharine childhood Americana to its fixation on the heat of the Australian summer. In these two worlds, liquids such as lemonade become agents of epiphany and soul-satisfaction. This motif is central to the book, which is divided accordingly into two major sections ('Things' and 'Spaces') by a core of eight 'Water Poems', of which this one, 'Lemonade', is typical:

There are places where time rests a little longer.
I wore ponytails, had unshaved legs, my problems
were small and monumental.
I seemed to sing pop songs all day long.

There is a portable snack stand at a beach
a backyard with a jungle gym
a picnic in a wooded park
freshly squeezed lemonade.

.....
it is the glint
the sparkle of sun on fruit, the straightforward joy
of quenching thirst: lemonade, just
lemonade.

Liquids are transliminal in Taylor Johnson's poems, bridging generations, nations and seasons, and sensuous in their many forms: alcohol, rain, ocean waves. Liquid is thus a vehicle for embodiedness that transcends the expatriate's perpetual concern with displacement. Taylor Johnson is at her best when the things and places of her poems become peripheral to her more liquid abstractions of physicality and emotion. In the poem 'Split', for example, an ironic list of cultural appropriations meant to convey the essence of US-Australian identity is redeemed by the far more measured, sensorial final passage:

and the smell of the sea, how it drifts to me
wherever I am when dusk clears its perfect throat
and floats over the city's red roofs

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and seeps between the gum nut trees
and the way we rejoice in a morning rain
and the scent of eucalyptus it brings:
these monumental things.

What the poems sometimes lack in musicality is made up for by Taylor Johnson's clear sense of popular reference points, which wield great emotional heft. Yet the juxtapositions she sets up by way of these, between past and present and between the US and Australia, are too often trite and clichéd. Thus, the past is a giddy and blithe whirlwind of college, sex, 'binge drinking and finding my soul', while adulthood is a concession to committed love, child-rearing and suburbia. The 'Things' that populate her first section, embodying relationships and experiences, are distinct but unilluminating: Australianess as a Hills Hoist; heartbreak, a vinyl record on repeat and Cheerios the distillation of a typical American childhood. Moreover, there is no real sense of place in the poems of the third section, 'Spaces'; rather, place is reduced to the space 'between what we know', an inventory of touchstones:

The big sky
my mother's face
pizza sauce served thickly.
'Awesome' 'cookie' 'garbage can'
.....
Port dolphins
gumtree bark
the footy the ocean
a roasted chook.

An exception is the poem 'Things', which captures tenderly the poignant awkwardness of an adult family reuniting to discuss with their parents their wills. Here, the cherished 'things' and future inheritances that connect a daughter to her parents – the Rolling Stones and a baby grand piano – are personal and distinctive, and the uncanniness of a childhood home is clear but understated in the image of familiar crockery in different drawers. As a result, the poem has a veracity that sets it apart from many others in the volume, with their more generic emblems for common experiences.

What Taylor Johnson's things and places really convey is a sense of distance and connection. Her poetry records unashamedly the sentimental attachments that many readers will recognise, which strand us all between homes, times and selves. The book will be accessible to most readers. In fact, the glossary at the end of the volume is mostly redundant for the Australian reader: curiously, as a Melbournian, I found Taylor Johnson's depiction of the US more familiar to me than her Adelaide. Hers is the instantly recognisable America I know from advertisements and TV shows. Similarly, I suspect that North American readers will recognise her dry, hot, ugg bootied Australia, even if her portrait of America is superficial at times. Both Australians and Americans reading this volume will

thus experience moments of recognition but also, more powerfully, a sense of foreignness, and herein lies the potency of Taylor Johnson's work: she allows her reader to see 'home' from the outside and so to experience the emigrant's state of constant in-betweenness.

Sarah Dowling